

BLIND SPOT

a novel

DRAFT

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My grandfather used to say: "Life is astoundingly short. To me, looking back over it, life seems so foreshortened that I scarcely understand, for instance, how a young man can decide to ride over to the next village without being afraid that--not to mention accidents--even the span of a normal happy life may fall short of the time needed for such a journey."

--Franz Kafka, "The Next Village"

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

The week after I received the letter from my father, a workmate of mine witnessed a fatal car accident. He was a young student chef in the restaurant where I worked as a dishwasher, and to say he witnessed it is not quite correct: in fact, he *heard* the accident, and he was the first to arrive on the scene, the first to see the results of the collision.

Jean was eager to tell me all about it, had been eager to tell everyone when he bounded into work that morning, a little late, but already recounting his story before he got through the door. He was shaken, true, but there was something reverential about his tone, as if he were honoured to have been the universe's first chosen beholder of these deaths. The rest of the staff quickly granted the young native of Trois-Rivières the respect that comes with such marks of distinction. And though Vivianne snapped at everyone to get back to work, even she drifted over to Jean's workstation, where he was chopping herbs early in the shift, and asked, "What did it look like?"

Jean's young, eager eyes sparkled as he told his story over and over that day, smiling and clicking his tongue, and shaking his head in real or stage distress at the tragedy. It was incredible, he said. Just incredible. The blood, the bone fragments. The damage done to a human body.

The crash had woken him at 7:12 a.m., and he rushed out of his Villray apartment into the street, wearing only a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, despite the cool of the October morning. He expected survivors, he said, and took his cell phone with him, dialing 911 on the way down the stairs. The little red car had smashed head-on into poorly-placed concrete divider, and from across the road, as he rushed towards the steaming metal, Jean lost any hope of finding survivors. The damage done to the automobile was frightening enough, and he braced himself for the carnage he would find inside.

"Have you ever seen a really bad car accident?" he asked me later that night, as the two of us finished the last of the evening's mop-up before heading home. "I mean close up, I mean with

the bodies, I mean before it gets cleaned? Have you ever seen what actually happens to people?" He wasn't interested in my answer to that question, which I did not offer in any case, and he pushed on with this uncomfortable mix of glee and horror, giving me a host of details I didn't want to hear. The smashed windshield, and jutting bits of metal, and descriptions of blood and bodies, the angle of one of the victim's arms. "Pointing in all the wrong directions," Jean said. "It was so weird." He rested his chin on his mop and looked off into the distance, somber and somehow pitying my lack of knowledge of the world. "You have no idea, Oscar," he said, and the lights glinted off the shining tile of the floor, "how terrible it really is. How really terrible when you see it up close like that. These were people talking and breathing and all of a sudden they're gone. I'm not religious," he continued, cleaning again as he spoke, paying close attention to the floor, moving the mop in slow figure eights, the cleansing symbols of infinity, over and over in front of him. "But it's scary seeing a body moments after the soul disappears. You have no idea."

I did have an idea but instead of saying so, I just nodded.

Jean spotted some sort of caked-on substance—a red sauce or dried blood--on the side of a stainless steel counter, and he knelt down to scrub it off. Vivianne was a demanding queen of her kitchen, and Jean, to his credit, was a conscientious apprentice.

"And a driving student," he continued, with a little gallows laugh, staring intently at whatever he was scrubbing as he spoke. "How's that for irony?" There were two dead in the car: an instructor from the Driving Ace Academy, and his charge. Their lesson, officials from Ace Academy had confirmed, had started at 7:00 am, and ended, earlier than expected, at 7:12 am. "I guess you call that a tragic irony."

I agreed with Jean on this point.

He offered to drive me home, but I refused, perhaps too curtly. I did not know Jean well, and he may have been offended, but I couldn't bear more of his gory descriptions, with their vaguely pornographic details and the excitement with which he related them.

"I prefer walking," I said, which was true. I never accepted such offers anyway. I hated cars, everything about them, their fenders and bumpers, their rubber, the horn honking, the aggressive headlights, that smell they exude when new, the more personalized smell they acquire when old, the gas, the gadgets, I hated it all. I always felt constrained in a car, as if I were imprisoned in a high-speed execution chamber, or a missile of death. I did not drive, did not own, or want, a car, and I had not been in an automobile, I calculated as I put my jacket on, in well over a year. The day spent listening to Jean's tales of death and destruction had not increased my esteem for the metal monsters.

And more than all that, I had this big decision to make; I do all my best thinking when I walk.

We were done with the cleaning, and we stepped out the staff door into the pungent alleyway at the back of the kitchen, the door locking behind us.

"God, it stinks back here," Jean said. He was not yet used to life in a professional kitchen.

I agreed, and told him he'd get used to it. He asked me again whether I wanted a lift, and again I shook my head, this time with some more finesse, and refused. "I really prefer walking," I said. "I always walk home."

This seemed to satisfy Jean. We waved goodbye, and set off in opposite directions.

I appreciated Jean's offer, but it did seem unfair, in a general sense, that he would subject me to such horror stories all day when I had this decision hanging over my head. Maybe it was some kind of cosmic warning; or maybe just a test of my will.

And here is the decision I had to make that day: I had to choose a driving school.

And Driving Ace Academy was now stricken from my list.

The letter from my father had come two weeks after my twenty-sixth birthday.

I had finished a long shift at the kitchen, and I walked home in the surprisingly warm October rain. The drops came down in big thick splashes as I crossed Sherbrooke street. The city was briefly filled with that smell of volcanic ash and rotting garbage, before the deluge which washed all the odours away. It started out as a pleasant walk home – I enjoy walking and I enjoy precipitation – and I was feeling content, more than usual, with the simplicity of my life. Walk to work. Wash dishes. Walk home. But the rain continued, intensified slowly, and eventually came pouring down, soaking me almost immediately, as I made my way up Parc Avenue. I got a chill as I passed under the Parc-Pine interchange, a giant, hideous mess of highway-style off-ramps, on-ramps, and octopus roadways, stuck in the centre of a crossroads that included a residential neighbourhood, a university, a hospital and a park. A mass of twisted concrete to remind us all what's most important in our cities.

By the time I got to the angel looking East from the park at the foot of Mount Royal, I was shivering, and I started a slow jog home in the rain.

Water dripped from my hair as I stuck the little key into the lock of the aluminum mailbox. I didn't see the letter at first, it was mixed in with flyers from two cable companies offering deals with ambiguous pricing schemes, and yet another request that I join the Canadian

Conservative Youth Party Alliance (*Dear friend: Do you like high taxes? Do you like government waste? Do you like welfare cheats? ...*) I suspected my godfather Horace Fry, who had raised me and should have known better, had put me on the CCYPA mailing list, as he had with the Global Association for the Defence of Free Enterprise, and the Young Business People's Conference for Progress, among many others over the years.

I read, and threw out, the political appeals and commercial entreaties before I sat down (in a change of clothes, warm and dry now) in my bedroom with the one unopened bit of post in my hand. As I think back on it, I remember a premonition, a certainty that this was a letter from my father. Maybe I invented that little memory to add more significance to the event, as if it needs more significance, but in any case, this premonition (real or imagined) was correct. The letter was the first communication from my father in twenty years. The postmark on the heavy little envelope was from Mexico City; it had been mailed on October 17, my birthday.

Though October had been unseasonably mild, the old radiators in my little apartment had woken from their summer slumber one evening early in the month, and had been clicking and rattling ever since, pouring thick, humid heat into the apartment at all hours. My attempts to control the heat at the source were fruitless, and my inquiries to the Greek landlord had similar effects: "The boiler never comes on till November 1," he told me, categorically. "It's never on before November 1," he repeated, his accent thickening as if to protect against any further questions from me. When I told him it *was* on, because my radiators were scalding hot, and invited him to come check for himself, he said, "I'll come look on November 1," and then hung up the phone. We had similar discussions every year around this time, they had become a kind of ritual.

I toured the apartment opening my three windows (one in the kitchen, two in the bedroom) to give the heat somewhere to go, and a channel of cool air traversed my home, in my bedroom window, through my corridor/living room, and out the window of the little kitchen.

I sat down at my desk and opened the letter.

"*Dear Oscar,*" it said, of all things. "*Dear Son ...*" and when I read those words, as my premonition was either invented or confirmed, I stood up, placed the letter carefully on the corner of my desk, and walked to the kitchen.

I had an urge to wash dishes, but there was none to be cleaned. Instead, I wiped the counters, then my old stove, cleaning under the two functioning burners, and then made myself a pot of tea, poured a mug. I opened the counters and stared at an almost-full bottle of Irish whiskey I had bought at least a year previously, but decided to stick with the tea. I went back to my bedroom, poked the letter with my finger, and settled back into my chair. I sat for a few minutes staring before I poked the letter again.

It fell off my desk, landing with a light thwack at my feet.

I leaned over the little piece of paper, and I read it there where it sat on the hardwood floor, tilting my head so I could read the script:

Dear Oscar. Dear Son:

I always wanted to write you a long letter. Now I'm not sure what to write or how to write it. Been a while since I wrote anything to anyone, and it's not like riding a bicycle. I forget how. First, I'm sorry. Sorry for your mother, sorry for you, sorry for this late letter. I always owed you more, sooner, my explanation. I want to come see you in Montreal, but I can't. Sorry. Can you come and meet me? I can't get to Canada, but what about upstate New York? Next couple of months. I'll let you know. Expect another letter. Maybe a phone call. Obviously, I have constraints, but you'll hear from me again. I'd prefer if you didn't mention this letter to anyone (especially Horace. And the police, of course).

PS. How are you?

The letter was not signed, not dated, had no return address. It was neatly-written, with tight precise characters that had long tails, high dots on the i's and long crosses on the t's. My first thought was to bring this letter from my father to a specialist in handwriting analysis, to find out who this man was, what sort of man could send such a letter to a son he had not seen in more than two decades. I wondered what had inspired him to write me now. Though the timing was, somehow, elegant: my father sent the letter on my birthday, twenty years after he had disappeared. I should have been angry about this letter, but I somehow felt an inexplicable and irrational pleasure at the thoughtfulness of my father for having remembered my birthday. I nudged the letter with my toe, then picked it up off the ground, weighed it in my hand, and read it again.

PS, my father had written, How are you?

I read the letter a third time, and I laughed, but my laughter sounded strange to me, and I was not sure where the funny bit was.

When I stopped laughing, I went to find the Yellow Pages, flipped through the book until I found the right section, and started making a list of driving schools.

* * *

One mid-winter afternoon, I must have been 10 or 11, I remember sitting at home in my pyjamas, sick with the flu, feverish. My high temperature coincided with an unseasonably warm spell in the city, and melting snow from the roof dripped loudly down past the windows, hitting the ground below with a sound like an intermittent and unrelenting smack of a hand on a face. I had spread myself out on a blanket in the den, with a tall glass of apple juice at my side; the TV crackled at me and I floated in and out of an uncomfortable slumber. When I was awake I turned the dial among the channels to find the cartoons and syndicated sit-coms that would take me through what in the end was a pleasant respite from a school day.

I awoke from one of my many short fitful slumbers to the sound of wailing sirens issuing from the little speaker on the television; a chaotic and bouncing image on the screen showed broken wood and glass everywhere, bodies strewn about, and the insistent, almost hysterical voice of a reporter with a British accent reporting on a bombing somewhere where the language was not English or French. An ambulance technician, dressed in white coveralls, slipped in a pool of blood and landed on his back, his uniform turning pink; the camera panned out to another man with a big bald head, a rim of grey hair and liver spots, sitting on the ground crying. He wore a white, short-sleeved dress shirt, remarkably pristine, unspattered, and grey flannel pants.

The camera zoomed in, and the man, imploring, raised what was left of his left arm; it had been blown off above the elbow, and he proffered it up to the camera as if displaying irrefutable evidence in a courtroom of the surprising frailty, unimagined, of our bodies, the treachery those limbs are capable of, and the lengths to which people will go to make others suffer for causes we imagine have nothing to do with us. The severed muscles and tendons looked like spaghetti. And what did the cameraman, who stood just meters away from this weeping human, do? He kept filming.

We are all strangely compelled, I think, by death and destruction, it excites our imaginations, touches an elemental and perverse desire in the human mind for chaos, entropy, dismantling of all that constrains us. There is much talk of the survival instinct, the protective instinct, that instantaneous flash that sends adults tearing into the middle of the street, with no thought of risk, to snatch baby from the path of the hurtling traffic, to spirit the little ones away from danger. But we love destruction as much as life: how else to explain the magnetic draw of a cliff's edge, the strange attraction of gory footage of animals disembowelling each other, the great searing but unmistakable aesthetic pleasure at watching, over and over and over, two massive sky-scraper collapse upon themselves in an improbable cloud of dust, like a frail aluminum cans crushed into patties under a heavy-soled foot.

In grade seven or eight, my class went on a field-trip to a police station. A burly, good natured cop showed us proudly around – the 4x6ft cells, with cream-coloured cinder block walls and yellow bars, just like in the movies; the racks of rifles; the police changing room adorned with topless pinups and dirty coffee mugs; the interrogation room with the one-way mirror, cracked down the middle and patched with duct-tape.

The cop had a surprisingly high voice for such a big man, a square head shaved on the

sides and in the back, and his massive hands looked like two damp sea creatures, hauled ashore. He let us hold his revolver (bullets removed of course) and I remember being astounded by its weight, its menace, the power I felt transferred to my sweating, nervous palm through that hunk of metal; the thing almost vibrated the threat of death, and when I held it, I felt that vibration through my whole body; for a brief moment, I was one with that revolver. The boys around me squinted their eyes at me, like covetous rodents, as I held the gun. When I passed it to the next boy I felt exhausted for a moment, and then lightened, as if I had been holding up a heavy block of stone, a tombstone, and had finally been relieved of the duty. I felt weaker, too, less, somehow, and I could see as each boy touched the gun the almost physical growth in their stature, the new maturity and gravity that seemed to descend on each of their faces.

The power to bestow death is intoxicating; and the thought of causing death fascinating, if only for the audacity, the impossibility (for most of us) of the idea. I wonder if anyone else imagined pointing that gun, loaded, at our teacher—M. Glasson, a mean-tempered uncharitable man, who smelled of cabbage and sweat, and was afflicted by regular bouts of facial psoriasis that rendered his punishments increasingly draconian—and just pulling the trigger?

But if I imagined it then, I knew a line was there, bold and clear. I did not take that thought seriously. Most people don't, except for psychopaths, fanatics and soldiers whose wise trainers do everything they can to remove the inconvenient and inefficient mental block of remorse and empathy.

But even among the rest of us, for whom murder is abhorrent, awful images of violence sometimes flash through the mind. Maybe we are curious about the limits of the acceptable, that is all, curious about the limits of knowledge in a way. There are two major markers for us all, birth and death; maybe it is only to be expected that the human mind spend great amounts of time imagining murder and sex, violence and copulation.

It wasn't so much terror of cars that had kept me from driving all those years. It was terror of myself, distrust of what I could do. Having control of an automobile, the murder weapon of choice in my gene pool, had always terrified me. Sometimes we are forced, however, to wrestle with our fears. To grapple with the faith we have in our own strength of character, when we have no choice – no real choice – but to push and push and find out, if we can, who we are. What we are capable of.

Sometimes we make sudden decisions, and it seems as though our whole lives have been creeping slowly and logically towards that one epiphany, that one conclusion that snaps all our previous choices--the paths we have taken, the events we have survived--into a coherent whole, a life with meaning, sense, a purpose that defines who we are, where we fit in the world. When I first read the letter, I thought vaguely of trains and busses and taxis and of asking someone to drive me to wherever my father was, but I dismissed all those options outright. I knew immediately that I *needed* to drive to meet him. In university I had two friends – acquaintances, really, we were in the same Russian History class – who got drunk one spring evening just before exams and found themselves on the roof of a bar. They decided, as drunk young men sometimes

do, to jump from one roof to the next. Alex made it; Mark did not. He fell three stories to the ground, and was in a coma for a week. I heard later that during that week Alex returned to the roof to make the jump; to make sure that it could be done; to prove *something* to himself that would relieve some of the pressure of guilt.

In the same way, I decided I would control the automobile that would take me to meet my father: I would learn to drive, I would procure a car, and I would go to my father on the same terms that he had left me.

In some ways—though I certainly didn't realize it at the time--I had been waiting all my life to learn to drive, to make this choice of driving school. I wanted to take precautions, to make sure I chose the right place of learning. It seemed important that I exact some requirements out of fate, and I thought perhaps by forcing my decision through a carefully constructed filter I could gain some measure of control. I devised an intricate selection process: I drafted criteria, conditions, exclusions, weighted values. I made a list of the schools, a matrix of benefits and drawbacks, a detailed scoring system. I spent days researching, making phone calls, scratching out bits of information and statistics on a thick yellow pad of lined paper, cross-referencing, cataloguing, sorting schools by various benchmarks: location, size and cost; teacher-to-student ratios; age of fleet; pass-fail statistics; accident rates of graduates. Pale post-it notes fluttered on the walls in my bedroom, and pages of analysis of benefits and drawbacks scrawled in different-coloured inks covered the floor.

Maybe it wasn't control I was looking for; maybe I wanted to absolve myself of responsibility for the decision. I wanted my choice to be objective and random--external--I wanted the decision about the place I would learn to drive removed from me by layers of cold science and factual evaluations.

I paced the apartment, examined cracks in the paint, counted the slats in the hardwood floor. I stared out my bedroom window for hours, lost in the green and greys of Mount Royal, in the last throes of foliage before the winter, a consoling hump that rose up behind the apartment buildings across the street. I could not sleep. The heaters in my apartment kept blasting great bellows of hot air that hung like a heavy fog in my rooms, even with the windows open. I suffered hazy, half-wakened dreams of seat belts, hubcaps, alternators, and windshield-wiper fluid; the menacing sound of roaring engines filled my ears, screeching tires from the street outside woke me from fitful slumber and sent me jumping from my bed in a sweat, heart pounding, eyes wide, short of breath.

I was distracted at work, and I broke three dishes in one shift – I had broken only one glass and two bowls in four years washing dishes at Révolution – and when Vivianne told me, "You break another plate, Oscar, and I'll start breaking fingers ... What's the matter with you?" I

didn't answer her at first because I wasn't paying attention. When she pressed me, on the edge of furious, I answered, "Nothing," and scrubbed harder at the greasy pot in my sink.

In the end, I couldn't make my elaborate system work. I didn't trust where my charts were taking me. I came close to a decision when the tallies of my scoring system pointed to a school called the Alpha Driver Center for Automobile Excellence, but I balked, uneasy with Alpha's monumental resources, its pledge to bring the finest North American driving techniques to all of Canada, the cool sweep of its grand vision for dominating the automobile instruction market. Alpha was a new entity, but they were taking the Wal-Mart approach to driving schools, and I suspected they would win their campaign; they had already won Driving School of the Year Award (from both the Quebec and Canadian Chambers of Commerce), after less than eleven months operating. I imagined Alpha, some great educational franchise owned by Phillip Morris, or GE or some other monster--headquartered in Connecticut or Illinois with codes of conduct and "Our Pledge to the Client" posted near the front door of a shiny glass building reflecting sky and clouds. I imagined a red-and-blue sign perched in the upper right-hand corner of the building, communicating precision and speed; three tall white flag poles shooting up from the concrete--*American* concrete, the best in the world--representing control, power and, as an afterthought, prudence; manicured shrubbery and the baked-black and sharp yellow lines of the parking lot, tight and mathematical, where a fleet of shining vehicles sat waiting, waiting. I could hear the clipped insistence of the instructor, tall, blond, certain and closely shaved, describing offensive driving techniques and collision avoidance in flat Midwestern, one-syllable words. *Fast. Turn. Clutch.*

I knew I could not learn at Alpha, no matter what my charts said. Still, I called them once, but hung up when I heard the voice at the other end, cold and hard, "ALPHA!" the telephone shouted at me, "ALPHA! What can *we* do for you? Hello! ALPHA here! Hello! ALPHA!"

Nine days into my fevered selection process—two days after Jean's stories had removed Ace One Driving Academy from contention – I walked home from a long shift in the balmy dampness of a warm October evening, weighing the advantages of SafetyFirst Driving School against the record of Cautious Conduction with ambivalence. Neither choice seemed right; no choice seemed right. I stopped on the corner Parc Avenue and Villeneuve, two blocks from my apartment, and pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes, massaged my temples with my thumb and middle finger, and exhaled a long, laboured breath. I cupped my chin in my hands, felt my palms against my cheeks, and studied the ragged posters on the telephone pole in front of me -- a missing cat, an all-organic garage sale, a night of punk and poetry to raise funds for the *Jardin Anarchiste*.

I thought about my shift at work, the heat of the water on my hands, and the slow tick of the minute hand on the kitchen clock, the smashing sound of hot frying pans on the range, and then the image of myself behind the wheel of a car. Then some of the details from Jean's insistent stories of collisions entered my mind: *the blood, the bone fragments*. I shuddered.

"Excuses," a voice said from behind me.

I turned to see a group of three workmen, heavy-faced and morose, wearing bright yellow coveralls, with the city's insignia covering their hearts. "You'll have to step away from the pole," one of the men said, and at first I thought he was joking, so I smiled at him. He motioned me towards him with a flick of his beefy hand, and I stepped out of the way as his companions encircled the telephone pole.

"Posters," he said by way of explanation, pointing vaguely at the fading collection of hand-drawn and photocopied notices. "Always more posters." He seemed resigned to his fate, his constant struggle against the residents of Montreal and their constant need to communicate with each other by way of illegal photocopied notes stapled to a phone pole. The three men began to tear the posters from the pole, crumple them and toss them in the garbage can. A gust of wind gathered around us, and a mist of fine rain sprayed down from the trees above; an empty bus, "Hors Service" displayed in the sign above the windshield, hurtled past, and the driver, tired and pale-faced looked out at us from his perch in the empty, fluorescent-lit bus. He leaned both forearms wearily on the great black steering wheel, and kept on driving.

A first layer of posters was ripped off, then a second: the word "DRIVING," written in bold black script on faded blue caught my attention, but the old poster was ripped quickly by professional hands before I could read the rest, then crumpled and thrown into the garbage can with the others.

When the men had finished their work and moved onto another pole further down the street, I hovered where I was for a moment, then on some impulse I can't explain, I approached the garbage can cautiously, and poked at the balls of paper. "DRIVING," I saw, again, and I gently lifted the discarded poster. Two white cars with tinted windows raced by, their engines revving like monsters as they tore past me and up Parc Avenue. I unfolded the page, smoothed it on my thighs: "*Stop the Assault on Canadian Driving Instruction!*" said the black text on the washed-out blue page, "*A lecture in defence of the beleaguered Canadian driving instruction system, by Dr. Victor Crowdy, founder of Friends of the Canadian Driver, and Head Instructor at Auto Vector Institute for Appropriate Driving.*" A brief screech of tires, further north up Parc Avenue, ripped through the night, and left a throbbing, cold silence in its wake.

I have always paid attention to coincidences. I had chosen the apartment where I lived because a nearby used bookstore sold me a copy of *The Master and Margherita*, recommended to me earlier that day by a beautiful and charming woman, a stranger, on the metro. Things might not happen for a reason, but they do happen, and when the universe presents two events, two signposts pointing to the same place, I have always thought it best to follow the directions. The poster, crumpled and ripped in two pieces, displayed a grainy photograph of Dr. Victor Crowdy, bespectacled, bucktoothed, exuding a look of benign contemplation: the calm and studious face of a balanced educator, a principled man, the face of a man, I thought, who could teach me to drive. I had missed his lecture, but, as if further confirmation were needed, his talk had been given two weeks before, on my twenty-sixth birthday.

I sniffed at the fine air of the evening, more spring-like than autumnal, and made up my

mind to visit the Auto Vector Institute for Appropriate Driving where I would, I promised myself, learn to drive.

A big heavy rain drop splashed on my head. I looked up Parc and saw the group of poster-rippers, marching slowly up the street and stopping at the next pole where they started ripping again. Another rain drop found its way down my collar, and then another splashed on my head, then several more on the road around me. I started a slow jog towards my apartment. The rain began in earnest, pouring down on me as I ran full-speed, water splashing against my pant-legs, and by the time I reached my apartment I was drenched, dripping wet and chilled.

But I had, finally, at age 26, chosen a driving school.